Aftermath: Women and Women's Organizations In Postconflict Societies

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Summary

SINCE THE END of the Cold War, intrastate conflicts have increased worldwide. Poverty, the struggle for scarce resources, declining standards of living, ethnic rivalries and divisions, political repression by authoritarian governments, and rapid social and economic modernization—all these factors contribute to intrastate conflicts.

Both men and women suffer from such conflicts. This Highlights, based on a longer CDIE synthesis report by the same title (PN–ACG–621), examines specifically the effects on women in six case-study countries: Bosnia, Cambodia, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, and Rwanda. It looks as well at the rise of indigenous women's organizations—their role, their impact, their future.

The effects of war on women fall into three broad categories: 1) *Social and psychological.* Women often were traumatized by the conflict. Fear of violence and sexual abuse (rape had actually been used as a tool of war, to subjugate, humiliate, terrorize) often kept women from moving about freely. Abject conditions in many postconflict societies contributed to the growth of prostitution. 2) *Economic.* Rural women were denied ownership of land their dead husbands or parents had owned. Urban women carved out livings mostly by selling foods and household items. During conflict, women could work in many occupations. As ex-combatants returned to civilian life, though, female workers often lost their jobs. 3) *Political.* In the absence of men, all six countries witnessed an expansion of women's public roles during the conflict.

The conflicts created a ripe environment for the emergence or growth of women's organizations. For one thing, the wars undermined the traditional social order; women found it easier to take part in public affairs. Moreover, governmental reforms after the wars created political space to launch women's organizations. Another factor was disillusionment. During or in the immediate aftermath of the wars, women's expectations of increased political participation had risen. Those expectations were never fully realized. Finally was the readiness of the international community to provide assistance to such organizations.

In the case-study countries, women's organizations have been active in virtually all sectors: social, educational, economic, political. They have established health clinics and carried out programs to generate income and employment for women. They have grappled with domestic violence, prostitution, and the plight of returning refugees and internally displaced women. And they have promoted democracy and human rights.

Attending the emergence of women's organizations is an array of obstacles. They are social and cultural, imposed from without, and organizational, imposed from within. Chief among the former is women's low social status. Chief among the latter

is the reluctance of women leaders to delegate authority and to train junior staff for future leadership. There is, moreover, a lack of communication and sharing among organizations.

International bodies have provided financial support and have helped indigenous women acquire managerial, accounting, and technical skills. Outside assistance has also helped legitimize women's organizations, for example by sheltering them from government interference. This assistance has been important to the development and sustenance of women's organizations—and it will continue to be necessary far into the foreseeable future.

Three Sets of Questions

As a part of its ongoing studies on the rehabilitation and reconstruction of societies ravaged by civil war, USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) undertook a multicountry assessment of gender issues in postconflict societies. The assessment concentrated on three sets of questions:

- What has been the impact of intrastate conflicts on women? How did these conflicts affect women's economic, social, and political roles and responsibilities? What are the major problems and challenges facing women in these societies?

- What types of women's organizations have emerged during the postconflict era to address the challenges women face and to promote gender equality? What activities do these organizations undertake? How successful have the organizations been in empowering women? What factors affect their performance and impact?

- What has been the nature and emphasis of assistance provided by USAID and other donor agencies to women's organizations? What are some of the major problem areas in international assistance?

The assessment sought to generate a body of empirically grounded knowledge that could inform the policy and programmatic interventions of USAID and other international donor agencies.

CDIE conducted fieldwork in six countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, and Rwanda. This report draws from the field investigations as well as from an extensive literature review, including studies by individual scholars and by national and international organizations.

Impacts of the Conflicts on Women and Gender Relations

Intrastate conflicts in all the case-study countries shared a set of common characteristics that had major implications for women and gender relations. First, the belligerent parties deliberately inflicted violence on civilian populations. About 95 percent of the casualties were civilian. Second, the intrastate conflicts displaced substantial numbers of people. Women and children generally constituted a majority of the refugees and internally displaced populations. The displacement of people to refugee camps or settlements, often in inhospitable environments, profoundly affected gender relations. Third, women's participation in war contributed to the redefinition of their identities and traditional roles. Like men, women were both the perpetrators and victims of violence in civil wars. Fourth, there was usually a conscious attempt to destroy the supporting civilian infrastructure, leading to increased poverty and starvation. Finally, these conflicts left among the belligerent groups within the countries a legacy of bitterness, hatred, and anger that is difficult to heal.

Social and Psychological Impacts

In all case-study countries, women—particularly those living in war zones—suffered from physical insecurity throughout the civil wars. When hostilities ceased, conditions improved only marginally. During the early phase of postconflict transition, the presence of demobilized soldiers and unemployed militia continued to pose a serious threat to the lives and property of innocent people, particularly those in rural areas. If security sector reforms were introduced at all, it took time before they produced visible results. Consequently, in many communities, women felt trapped in their homes. Fear of violence and sexual abuse often kept them from moving about freely and restricted their social and

economic activities. In many countries, the continuing animosity and distrust among former belligerent ethnic groups compounded the problem of physical security.

Many women were traumatized by conflict. Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Guatemala, and Rwanda experienced particularly high levels of stress and anxiety in their daily lives. They displayed typical signs of trauma: depression, listlessness, anguish, chronic fatigue, psychological disabilities, and recurrent recollections of traumatic incidents. But despite severe emotional trauma, many women in these countries demonstrated remarkable resilience and courage that enabled them to survive.

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Soldiers in belligerent groups violated women as a tool of warfare. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Rwanda, rape was an element of ethnic cleansing. Often women were raped in the presence of their spouses, parents, or other family members. This served to humiliate and terrorize members of particular ethnic groups. In Angola and Mozambique, rebels often kidnapped young women and kept them as sex slaves. In many postconflict societies, abject poverty, migration of populations, and social disorganization caused by conflicts contributed to the growth of prostitution.

Conflicts profoundly affected families, often increasing women's household burdens. With men either disabled or away from home fighting, imprisoned, or dead, women became heads of households and assumed greater economic responsibilities. The responsibility of raising orphans and abandoned children often fell on extended families or even neighbors, with women shouldering most of the burden. Women typically assumed greater economic responsibilities. Yet these additional responsibilities did not necessarily result in a corresponding decline in their household chores. Intrastate ethnic conflicts often created problems for families of mixed ethnic makeup. Domestic violence by men against women increased in many war-torn countries.

Economic Impacts

Women who headed households faced many economic and social difficulties during postconflict transition. A major problem was the lack of property rights. Women were denied ownership of land their dead husbands or parents had owned. Woman-headed farm households, particularly those overseen by widows and divorcées, often lacked the resources to purchase agricultural inputs and faced difficulty obtaining labor for heavy agricultural operations. Rural women who owned no land or other assets worked as laborers or sharecroppers. They received minimal compensation for their hard work and barely managed to feed their families. In urban areas, most women worked in the informal sector, carving out their livelihoods mostly by selling vegetables, fruits, cooked foods, clothes, or other household items.

Women's participation in the labor force increased in all postconflict societies. Desperate economic conditions and the growth of woman-headed households forced increasing numbers of women to enter labor markets. Moreover, conflicts eroded the traditional social and political order that led women to assume new economic roles and responsibilities. In all countries except Bosnia, women's participation in agriculture increased. During conflict, women could work in many industries and occupations once closed to them. As economies shrank, and as ex-combatants returned to civilian life during the early phases of postconflict transition, female workers in the organized sector often lost their jobs.

Conflicts contributed to a marked increase in poverty. The consequences of poverty were invariably worse for women than men in all case-study countries. Cultural, social, and economic factors worked to women's disadvantage. Women suffered disproportionately more drastic reductions in nutrient intake. In times of economic adversity, girls' health and education needs received less priority than did those of boys. The economic conditions of returning women refugees, members of woman-headed households, and women receiving food subsidies generally worsened during postconflict transition.

Political Impacts

All case-study countries witnessed an expansion of women's public roles and responsibilities during conflict. The challenges of surviving the absence of men, coupled with the opportunities created by conflict, contributed to this development. Women became more engaged in churches, schools, hospitals, and private charities, usually volunteering their services. They also established support groups. Further, in the absence of men, women often took charge of local political institutions.

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Women entered the public arena to support war efforts. They raised funds, organized public meetings and marches, and mobilized public opinion for war in the name of ideology, ethnicity, or nationalism. They joined militias. In many case-study countries, they supported military operations by running auxiliary services such as health and intelligence operations. Some women also founded organizations to promote peaceful resolution of the conflicts and became powerful voices in the peace accords. Their participation in public life raised their political skills and expectations.

Despite a brief era of disfranchisement at the immediate end of conflict, women in postconflict societies made headway in politics. For example, the percentage of women members of national parliaments increased in subsequent elections (national elections held after the first postconflict election) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, El Salvador, and Georgia. The representation of women in the ministries of national governments also increased gradually after conflicts ended.

The Emergence And Contributions Of Women's Organizations

The term *women's organizations* refers to all voluntary women-run organizations that promote women's welfare and gender equality. Most women's organizations in the case-study countries fall into one of three overlapping categories: small grass-roots groups, regional or national groups, and national umbrella organizations.

Four broad factors contributed to the growth of women's organizations in postconflict societies:

- During the conflicts social, economic, and political transformation occurred. Conflict not only undermined the traditional social order but also facilitated increased participation of women in public affairs.

- Some women grew disillusioned with the male leaders of political parties who initially professed commitment to gender equality but later reneged on the commitment. Many such women founded organizations to promote feminist agendas.

- Reforms by transition governments initiated as a part of the peace process created political space to launch women's organizations. The establishment of democracy, the codification of the right to form organizations, and the emergence of relatively free media gave women and other groups unprecedented freedom to form their own organizations.

- The international community channeled generous assistance through nongovernmental organizations to build up civil society institutions.

Activities of Women's Organizations

Women's organizations have been active in almost every important sector—social, educational, economic, and political—in the case-study countries. They have established health clinics, provided reproductive health care, and organized mass vaccination programs. They have carried out programs to generate income and employment for women and woman-headed households, with special emphases on vocational training and microcredit. They have addressed domestic violence, prostitution, and the plight of returning refugees and internally displaced women.

They have, moreover, promoted democracy and human rights. They have played an important role in organizing postconflict elections. They have participated in voter registration drives, held voter education programs, and assisted in monitoring elections. Women's organizations have promoted social reconciliation among former enemies. They have sponsored meetings, seminars, and marches to promote mutual understanding and goodwill. They have undertaken advocacy activities to fight discrimination and promote gender equality.

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Several organizations also have worked to increase women's participation in political affairs. Some organizations have developed women's platforms, covering vital matters affecting women, and sought the endorsement of political parties.

Obstacles and Limitations To Women's Organizations

Women's organizations faced numerous obstacles in carrying out their activities. Some were external. Cultural and social factors—including their low status—held them back. Many leaders of women's organizations did not enjoy the social status necessary to interact equally with their male counterparts. Male members of households often did not support the public activities of female members. The disabling environment of postconflict societies caused serious administrative, social, and economic problems that beset all the case-study countries. Those problems led to unnecessary delays at the beginning of transition. And the short-term nature of international assistance often prevented women's organizations from planning for the long term.

Many women's organizations had internal limitations as well. They suffered from management and leadership problems. Top leaders were reluctant to delegate power and to train junior staff for future leadership. Leaders were concerned that a professionally trained staff might challenge their authority. They also tended to monopolize participation in international training programs, meetings, and conferences. Consequently, middle and junior staff found prospects for upward mobility within the organization blocked by the top brass. This affected not only the day-to-day operations of these organizations but also their long-term viability.

Finally, a lack of communication and cooperation among women's organizations limited their impact. As a result, efforts were often duplicated, the image of women's organizations in the public mind was undermined, and skills and expertise were not shared across organizations.

Organizations' Contributions

The emergence of women's organizations and their myriad activities empowered women in several ways:

- The organizations helped women victims of conflict, such as returning refugees and the internally displaced, those sexually abused during and after conflict, and others in desperate situations. Their timely assistance was often instrumental in enabling vulnerable women to regain control of their shattered lives.

- Organizations' activities to generate income saved many women from utter poverty and deprivation. Organizations helped beneficiaries become economically self-reliant and perhaps socially less subservient.

- By facilitating political participation through political education, voter registration drives, and assistance to women candidates, women's organizations contributed to political empowerment.

- They raised gender awareness among their members as well as the general population. They organized meetings, workshops, and discussions to mobilize women and to educate both women and men.

- In many case-study countries, they succeeded in putting gender issues on the national agenda.

Their Sustainability

The sustainability of women's organizations is questionable. Most organizations depend largely (if not exclusively) on international assistance. The condition is not likely to improve in the near future. The governments are not in a position to fund their activities, nor is the private sector. Yet managerial sustainability does not seem to be a major problem. There is no shortage of well-trained and committed women to manage and run these organizations, and women invariably do run them. Women's organizations have no difficulty establishing rapport with three key stakeholders: targeted women beneficiaries, external funding agencies, and concerned governmental agencies and departments. More important, their capacity in this area is likely to improve over time.

International Assistance To Women's Organizations

Contributions From The International Community

The international community provided extensive assistance to women's organizations in all case-study countries. The experience of those countries shows unequivocally that international assistance contributed profoundly to the growth, activities, and continual survival of women's organizations. Without international assistance, many women's organizations would not have emerged. Moreover, international assistance enabled most women's organizations to initiate projects that benefited women and empowered them. It also contributed to the growth of managerial, accounting, and technical skills. For example, because of their association with the international donor community, women's organizations gained expertise in preparing and submitting proposals to funding agencies and in managing contracted programs and techniques to raise funds from local sources. Finally, international assistance contributed to legitimizing women's organizations. In many cases, international recognition protected women's organizations from undue interference from the various arms of governments.

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Limitations of Assistance

And yet international assistance had limitations. One major problem was the short duration for assistance. In an environment of shifting donor priorities, the short duration of assistance programs prevented recipient organizations from developing

their own priorities. Lacking their own funds, many organizations had to abandon their original plans and struggle to establish new programs in areas where they had no experience.

A second problem was the cumbersome requirements for proposals, progress reports, and monitoring information of international donor agencies. These requirements had high opportunity costs.

A third problem, related to the second, was that large, well-established women's organizations (usually led by highly connected women leaders) tended to receive the lion's share of international assistance.

Fourth, there has been little or no donor coordination. Donor agencies have tended to work independently without adequate information and understanding of one another's programs.

Fifth, international donors were unable to disseminate information about resource availability to all interested women's organizations. This was one reason that just a few organizations received most international resources, while many deserving organizations were denied assistance.

Finally, international assistance to women's organizations suffered because the development community lacked a coherent policy framework for assisting women and promoting gender equality in postconflict societies.

Recommendations

The CDIE field teams made a number of recommendations. Among them:

1. Continue to foster women's organizations. USAID should invigorate its policy of fostering women's organizations as an integral part of its efforts to rehabilitate and reconstruct postconflict societies. The Agency also should encourage its development partners to support women's organizations.

2. Build on women's economic and political gains. Because the postconflict era provides an opening to build on the progress made by women during conflict, it makes sense for USAID to continue to capitalize on this opportunity.

3. Pay greater attention to civilian security. USAID can assume a leadership role in publicizing the problem of civilian security and the need for concerted action. The Agency can also encourage other agencies and organs to carry out programs that can enhance physical security for women.

4. Make concerted efforts with the rest of the international community to prevent sexual abuse of women. Measures might include protecting witnesses, training international peacekeepers in gender issues, and promoting more women to international judicial posts.

5. Promote microcredit. USAID should support microcredit programs but not ignore their limitations—they are not cures for all economic problems facing women in postconflict societies.

6. Support property rights for women. USAID should continue supporting property-rights reforms affecting women. This should include not only constitutional and legislative reforms but also their effective implementation.

7. Consider multiyear funding. The assurance of assistance for periods longer than 6–9 months will help build institutional capacity and boost staff morale.

8. Promote sustainability of women's organizations. USAID should provide technical assistance, when necessary, to improve management; consider funding a portion of core costs, in addition to program costs, for a limited period; and help organizations become self-reliant by such means as improving skills in advocacy, fund-raising, and coalition building.

Suggested Reading

All 11 case studies on women in postconflict societies are available on the Internet at www.usaid.gov. Click on Partner Resources, then USAID Evaluation Publications, then Working Paper Series.

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